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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 003159

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: DEFMIN ELIAS MURR SEEKS FURTHER U.S.
ASSISTANCE FOR LEBANON

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: Section 1.4 (d
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SUMMARY

¶1. (S/NF) On September 26, the Ambassador and poloff met with the Deputy Prime Minister/Defense Minister Elias Murr. Murr reinforced his commitment to cooperation with the U.S. on defense reform and modernization for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). He favored U.S. efforts over the European Union efforts and was looking for U.S. support to further Lebanon's reform and provide military equipment for the LAF. On Hizballah, he denied the "rumors" that Hizballah was transferring arms into Palestinian refugee camps for hiding. He said that Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's rally speech last weekend was empty politically and did not present anything new from the Hizballah leader to help widen his base of support. END SUMMARY.

REQUEST FOR ASSISTANCE IN DEFENSE REFORM

¶2. (S/NF) Defense Minister Murr indicated that when it comes to defense reform and Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) modernization, U.S. support and defense assistance is what he "really" wants. Murr said that 80 percent of the LAF's equipment comes from the U.S., from ammunition to spare parts for armored vehicles. It is only natural to want to improve the defense relationship with the U.S. to get the correct training and spare parts for the equipment in the LAF inventory. When the Ambassador inquired about the European Union's contributions to the Lebanese Defense Ministry, Murr responded that the Europeans are filled with "words, but no money." He highlighted the French efforts that are constrained by domestic political consideration for upcoming elections and apparent French unwillingness to commit money at this time. The Ambassador stressed that further U.S. cooperation and support for the Lebanese military forces requires a proper review process in determining future LAF defense requirements. The Ambassador stated that having Murr as a brake against bad decisions was good, but in the long term, the solution for the LAF is reform. Murr indicated that he is often the only who stands in the way of bad decisions in defense procurement and that he would continue doing so for the future. He indicated that he would take the political heat for being the one who stands in the way.

NO TRANSFER OF HIZBALLAH ARMS TO PALESTINIAN CAMPS

13. (S/NF) When the Ambassador asked about press reports on the possible smuggling of Hizballah armaments into the Palestinian refugee camps to avoid forfeiture to the LAF, Murr denied that this was happening. He said that such reports were simply "rumors" that had no truth. Murr indicated that vehicles were being checked by Lebanese security forces and there is no indication that arms are entering the refugee camps.

NOT IMPRESSED BY NASRALLAH'S SPEECH

14. (S) The Ambassador solicited Murr's opinion about Nasrallah's speech. Murr replied that there was nothing "new" in Nasrallah's political rhetoric and that the speech was "empty" of political content. Murr indicated that he was not impressed by and that it would not expand Nasrallah's support beyond his base. The Ambassador asked about Nasrallah's rhetoric in pursuing a "just and clean" government in Lebanon. Murr indicated that Nasrallah was trying to set himself up as the only arbiter to decide what resulted in a "just and clean government." Murr's present concern was that Nasrallah wants to change the whole makeup of the sytem of government.

GUARDED RESPONSE TO BRAMMERTZ REPORT

15. (S) The Ambassador asked Murr about the Syrian linkage in the latest Brammertz report on the investigation into the

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assassination of Rafiq Hariri. Murr stated that he had read the report and found it "interesting," but not surprising. He was guarded in his remarks and did not venture a firm opinion about the content of the report, nor did he comment about any linkages with Syrian authorities. (Note: Murr -- who was one of the victims of the "14 other crimes" when he was the target of a car bomb attack in July 2005 -- stated that he would be interviewed by the Brammertz Commission in the coming week, which might explain his reluctance to comment. End Note.)

NO GAIN FOR LAHOUD IN EXPANDING CABINET

16. (S) The discussion ended on the topic of expanding the cabinet from 24 to 30 positions, a proposal making the rounds in the camp of Michel Aoun and pro-Syrian politicians. President Lahoud's hope is to obtain a more dependable pro-Syrian blocking minority in the cabinet. Ticking off the complicated confessional arithmetic involved, Murr commented that even these extra cabinet members would not guarantee a pro-Syrian blocking minority. The pro-Syrians in the cabinet now, Murr said, are the five Shia ministers. A0n expanded "national unity" cabinet would comprise 3 Christians, 1 Shia, 1 Sunni and 1 Druze. The Druze would likely come from Walid Jumblatt's bloc, and the Sunni from Saad Hariri's. That means that only four of the new ministers would be pro-Syrian, not enough when added to the Shia to make a blocking minority. The Ambassador asked about Yacoub Sarraf, the Greek Orthodox Minister of Environment who (alone among the three ministers -- including Murr -- appointed by Emile Lahoud who remains reliably pro-Syrian). "Yacoub now votes with me," Murr said.

17. (S/NF) COMMENT: Overall, Defense Minister Murr was candid in his response to the political and defense situation in the country. He realized that the modernization of the LAF is a long term project. While Murr pushed for the U.S. to increase lethal assistance to the LAF during the meeting, his intention is to improve the image of the LAF as capable to

defending Lebanon's borders and sovereignty. In light of Hizballah's pretext for keeping its arms (i.e., a lack of ability by the national government to defend Lebanese territory), Murr suggested that USG defense assistance should be aimed at not only improving the country's tattered border security situation, but also re-establish the GOL's standing with its own people.

FELTMAN